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MESSIAHSHIP AS CONCEIVED BY JESUS.

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JESUS claimed to be an innovator. A piece of *new* cloth and a *new* vintage were the emblems he chose to denote the significance of the religious movement of which he was the originator. In reference to the amount of initiative to be ascribed to him, on the whole or in detail, two tendencies prevail. One is to reduce it to a minimum; to find in his teaching just a grain of novelty, just one step in advance of previously current thought. This view wears a scientific aspect, and seems to be in harmony with the spirit of evolutionary philosophy. The other tendency is to magnify the initiative of Jesus, to find in his teaching and in his whole religious attitude an amount of novelty which goes far to justify the application to his ministry of the words, "Behold I make all things new." This view is not so unscientific as it may at first appear, for even the theory of development recognizes the occasional occurrence of large variations.

My sympathies are with the second of these opposite tendencies. Jesus has ever appeared to me a great innovator, one who brought in, and gave currency to, a new religious spirit, and a whole group of new religious ideas. He used old words and gave them a new meaning, whereby it came to pass that

Israel's stock of religious ideas in his hands underwent *transformation*. His conceptions of God, man, the world, righteousness, the kingdom of God, Messiahship, are all more or less completely transformed conceptions, the transforming influence being throughout the same, so that the new ideas are all in harmony with each other.

Of course, the novelty is not absolute. All new views, however startling, have been more or less prepared for in human thought. There is always a dawn before sunrise. But the dawn of the day ushered in by Jesus must be sought, not in contemporary Jewish legalism, which was a dark winter night, but in some pregnant thoughts of Old Testament prophets. Christ's transformations were for the most part reversions to prophetic oracles which had not previously received due appreciation, such as Jeremiah's oracle of the new covenant, with its law written on the *heart* (not merely on stone tablets) and God revealing himself directly to the individual spirit, and the still more remarkable oracle of the later Isaiah concerning the redemptive suffering of the righteous for the unrighteous.¹

These two oracles constitute a great advance on earlier Hebrew thought on God, his kingdom, and his providence. The ancient ideals of devout Israelites were very simple and naïve. Their *pium desiderium* was a righteous nation, and they believed that such a nation must needs be happy and prosperous within and safe from all molestation or domination from without, under the government of a wise, righteous, God-given hero-monarch. This hope and this faith found expression in earlier Messianic prophecy. A kingdom of Israel in which all the people should be righteous, therefore happy, was the Messianic kingdom, and a king worthy of it to reign over such a people was the Messianic king. But what hope of ever seeing such a people and such a king? Where were they to come from? It was such despair that gave birth to Jeremiah's idea of the law written on the *heart*, and to the deutero-Isaiah's idea of the righteous servant of Jehovah suffering redemptively for the unrighteous. The latter conception, of course, implied the total breakdown

¹ *Vide* note at the end of this article.

of the primitive theory of providence : given righteousness, happiness follows. A righteous nation *ipso facto* prosperous within, independent toward all without ; the righteous people the greatest sufferers—what an acute antagonism !

In the formula, “an elect people righteous, therefore happy,” the prophets, with their passion for righteousness, placed the emphasis on the epithet “righteous.” The common tendency, of course, was to take the righteousness for granted and to accentuate the happiness. But both prophets and ordinary men were agreed in this, that their hope for the future was the nation of Israel fulfilling covenant duties, and enjoying covenant blessings, under a king whose supreme wish was the felicity of his people—a hero-king like *David*. Their Messianic hope was national, secular, materialistic.

Very different was the Messianic idea of Jesus. Nationalism disappears, and in its room comes humanity. A people is no longer the unit, but the individual human soul. God’s kingdom is within, realizing itself, not in a righteous nation, but in a community of regenerated spirits. Universalism is implicit in the conception—it is the complement of the new individualism. Jesus, doubtless, was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but his personal ministry among his own countrymen is simply the appropriate first stage of a world-wide movement. Even righteousness undergoes transformation. It is inward, personal, spiritual ; Jeremiah’s law written on the heart ; a right spirit ; true, pure affection ; trust in God ; reverence for the good ; love for men, friends and foes alike. All kinds of social righteousness will flow from it, but as a stream from the fountain of a pure heart, the primary thing. The true Christ is he who brings in this new type of righteousness by teaching, example, and personal influence through sympathy with the sinful and through the tragic experience of crucified love.

The originality of Christ’s thought concerning Messiahship and kindred topics can be conveniently and strikingly verified by contrasting him with John the Baptist, who, in his mode of thought and life, revived the more ancient prophetic tradition. John appears to have inherited the primitive Hebrew theory of

the inseparable connection between righteousness and happiness, with its concomitant conception of God as simply a moral governor, rendering to every man according to his works, strict to mark iniquity, therefore visiting an unrighteous people, such as Israel was then, certainly, inexorably, pitilessly with condign punishment for her sin. Hence his conception of Messiah's function as chiefly judicial, punitive. He that was coming was to come as an impersonation of the fury of Jehovah, with sifting fan and hewing ax in hand, scattering the ungodly like chaff driven by the stormy wind, and consuming them as a devouring fire. "He will baptize you with the *wind* (of judgment) and with fire." Such is the John of the synoptical gospels, whose presentation must be accepted as historical. John's Messianic idea was *legal*.

How different the thought of Jesus all along the line!

First he rises entirely above the legalistic conception of God as purely and simply the divine administrator of retributive justice. Very characteristic from this point of view is the saying in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:45): "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." Compare with this the conception of the providential order embodied in a text from Deuteronomy (11:13-15): "It shall come to pass if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments . . . that I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in the fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full." In the light of this earlier prophetic utterance we see that the saying of the preacher on the hill, which to us now may appear very commonplace, was then no commonplace, but nothing less than the proclamation of a *new theory of providence*, viz., that in large areas of human experience (sunshine and rain—how much they represent!) there is no fixed, invariable connection between conduct and lots, and that the reason of this is not that there is no God, nothing but blind laws of nature, or that God is indifferent to moral interests, but that the highest supreme attribute of God is not, as men of old thought, retribu-

tive justice, but benignant, gracious love; whence it comes that he deals not with men after their sins, but is good to all, even to the unthankful and evil; not merely loving them that love him and keep his commandments, but loving even his enemies. Truly a great, original, pregnant piece of insight into the everlasting fact which men, blinded by theories, had hitherto for the most part failed to see, though not wholly, as that sentiment in the Psalter, "he hath not dealt with us after our sins," suffices to attest. This flash of direct vision into the heart of things means much—a new idea of God and of his whole relations to the children of men, God a magnanimous, benignant being, patient with the bad, preferring the policy of mercy to that of judicial rigor as the means of fostering piety in accordance with the deep thoughts of another psalm, "then is forgiveness with thee *that thou mayest be feared*." A new idea I call it; but the fact is as old as the creation, for God's relation to man was never purely legal, but inside Eden and outside ever gracious; he always benignantly giving, men always thankfully or unthankfully receiving. We expect to find that this saying about the sun and the rain is more than an *obiter dictum*, that the idea it expresses is central in the thought of Jesus, and that it will determine the character of his whole public ministry.

The fact corresponds to our expectation. Jesus deemed it fitting that Messianic activity should reflect the benignity of the Father in heaven, and the best evidence that he was himself the Messiah is the fidelity and enthusiasm with which he worked out the programme of patient, gracious love. In connection with the former of these two statements it is interesting to note the prophetic oracles on which his Messianic idea seems to have been modeled. To two, more than all, belongs this place of honor: Isa. 42: 1-4, beginning, "Behold my servant whom I uphold—mine elect in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him;" and Isa. 61: 1-2, beginning, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek." These texts are prominent in the gospel narratives. There are echoes of the former—indeed, I may say of both—in the preternatural

phenomena connected with the baptism of Jesus—the descent of the spirit on him and the voice from heaven pronouncing him God's well-beloved. The first evangelist quotes the earlier oracle at length as giving a faithful picture in prophetic language of the real Jesus as opposed to the Jesus of a distorted pharisaic imagination (12:17–21). Luke gives the second oracle as the text of Christ's discourse in the synagogue of Nazareth (4:18). Some critics might be disposed to find in these facts simply evidence that it was such a benignant Christ the apostolic church discovered in Jesus. That they certainly are at the least. But why doubt that these prophetic oracles helped to shape the Messianic idea and consciousness of Jesus? The post-baptismal phenomena, however objective, answer to a subjective mental state of the recipient of the experiences. Jesus, that is to say, was consciously filled with the spirit of divine patience and pity, and he was assured that, so filled, he was the well-beloved of the Father. That spirit had impelled him to leave Nazareth for the scene of John's baptism, and in its stirring within his breast he recognized the voice of God summoning him to a Messianic vocation, for the fulfilment of whose tasks the chief requisite was fervent, passionate, self-devoted love. Jesus' Messianic idea was *evangelic*.

Jesus was faithful to the ideal suggested to him by his own heart and happily expressed in the above-cited prophetic texts. His public life was the outflow in word and deed of his "enthusiasm of humanity." Anyone who watched his career could see that he had not come to judge, or to be the executor of divine wrath. The Baptist saw it and was disappointed. Hence his doubt if the man of Nazareth whom he had baptized some months ago was, after all, "he that should come." That doubt is a hard fact not to be explained away, and it is conclusive evidence as to the wide gulf which separated John from Jesus in their respective conceptions of Messiahship. For John the Messiah is the agent of retributive justice under a system of purely legal relations between God and men; for Jesus he is the minister of divine mercy under a benignant sign of grace. *Hinc illæ lacrymæ*. Hence that stumbling of a noble man over benefi-

cent events wherein he should have rejoiced, to which Jesus made pathetic allusion when he said : "Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me." John had expected a bad world to be catastrophically destroyed and a good world to be brought in by a multitudinous repentance inspired by panic fear of the judgment day. Messiah had come, it was fondly hoped, but not the judgment ; not the catastrophic method, but activities of which the fit emblems were not the swift-working wind, fire, fan, and ax, but the gentle, noiseless, gradually efficient forces of light and leaven, producing not hasty, superficial reform, but radical regeneration. How surprising to the stern representative of the old régime of law, and legal rigor, and pitiless strictness to mark iniquity ! Blessed the man who is not surprised or scandalized ! He is the child of a new time, a citizen of a new kingdom of heaven. He lives in the new, happy era of *grace*.

There were some such men—a few who did not share John's doubts, and who gathered around Jesus as disciples. Some of them, according to the account in the fourth gospel, intrinsically credible, had been disciples of the Baptist first, and we can well believe that they were glad to make the change of masters. For there was a great difference between the two companies. In the one reigned gloom, in the other gladness. The John circle fasted, the Jesus circle feasted. Jesus compared his company to a wedding party for which fasting and sadness were impossible. It is a word full of meaning in reference to the difference between the religious thought of Jesus and that of the Baptist. It throws us back on the question : Why was the prevailing temper of the two societies so diverse ? The answer must be : Because the masters were different in their spirit and teaching ; the one gloomy and despairing, the other bright and hopeful ; the one austere and severe, the other genial and gentle ; the one preaching a gospel which was no gospel, not *good* news but *awful* news of doom and destruction, the other preaching a gospel indeed ; the one telling disciples of a divine Lawgiver with his law written on tables of stone and demanding obedience under dire penalties, the other ever speaking to disciples of a

divine Father who loves enemies and strives by patience and pity to make them friends and sons.

In the school of Jesus, in short, we are in a different world, and while using old phrases, for convenience, learn to put on them new meanings. Having used the Baptist as a foil to make this point clear, we may now forget him and pass to one or two other considerations which confirm the view now offered as to the nature of Christ's Messianic idea.

Not without a bearing on the matter in hand is the relation of Jesus to the proscribed classes of Jewish society, the "publicans and sinners" of the gospels. His intensely sympathetic attitude toward them revealed the advent of a new religious spirit, harmonizing with the new doctrine about God as before all things benignant. It also implied on the part of Jesus a universalist outlook, a conviction that his work concerned not Jews only, but humanity, and that his ultimate sphere of influence was the wide world. To the religious Jew a publican was as a heathen — "as a heathen man and a publican" was a byword. Yet Jesus, fully aware of this, treated publicans as comrades and brethren worthy to be called to Messiah's feast and capable of becoming good citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Thereby he said in deed what he also said in word: "Many shall come from the east and west and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." It foreshadowed a Gentile Christendom, the near approach of the time when the "isles" should wait for Messiah's law. The divine kingdom of Jesus is no mere petty kingdom of Israel, nor is his Messiah a merely Jewish Messiah. Nationalism has become a thing of the past; humanity is now the watchword. The human soul is God's throne, and the meanest of men, Gentile dogs and degenerate Jews alike, may sit in heavenly places. Such deep significance lay in that festive meeting of Jesus with publicans and sinners in Capernaum.

Of similar import was the habitual use by Jesus of the title "son of man." It said all in a name, summed up his whole Messianic idea and message in a word. To understand its import one would almost need to have heard Jesus pronounce it, care-

fully noting accent and emphasis. Sometimes there would be a stress on the word "man," hinting antithesis to some other, more pretentious title—son of *man* versus son of *David*; *e. g.*, son of David was the popular name for Jesus among the multitudes who followed and admired him. Jesus heard them use it, said nothing by way either of acceptance or rejection, simply kept calling himself with the slightest possible declinatory emphasis "son of *man*." He was not proud of the name, son of *David*. He attached no vital significance to it. He did not believe that to be a literal descendant of David was a necessary qualification for Messiahship. It was enough to be equipped with Messianic charisms, to be filled with God's spirit of love, and so to be the well-beloved of God. That one might be who was not a lineal descendant of David; one of whom that could be said was at least a son of David in spirit. "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed," said Paul. "If one be spiritually fit to be a Christ, then is he a son of David," would have said Jesus.

If we are to attach due importance to the foregoing statement, we must know the precise value to be assigned to the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. It is of no vital importance to *our* faith in Jesus as the Christ. To think otherwise would be to place ourselves on the level of Jewish Christianity, with its conception of Messiah as necessarily a descendant of David, as God's messenger mainly, if not exclusively, to Israel, and as God's agent in restoring the kingdom to Israel, and therefore extending it to Gentiles only in case the restoration of the national theocratic kingdom were found to be impracticable. Matthew's genealogy is a part of the primitive Christian apologetic for the benefit of Jewish Christians entertaining such a Messianic idea. From that point of view it is legitimate. For the sake of Jewish Christians who needed such a staff to lean upon it was worth while showing, if it could be done, that, as a matter of fact, Jesus was a descendant of King David. The genealogy is the attempted proof, and that it stands at the beginning of the first gospel, an interesting monument of service rendered in the apostolic age to the weak faith of a section of the infant church, can do us no harm if we understand to take it just for what

it is worth. That Luke understood its value to be only relative we can see from the manner in which his genealogy is constructed. It runs back, away past David and Abraham, to Adam and thence up to God. The effect is to render Davidic descent insignificant to faith, and lay the emphasis on son of Adam or *man*, and son of *God*; to make Davidic sonship, like the moon seen in the sky in daytime, lusterless and useless in presence of the sun. Luke, doubtless, knew what he was doing: that "son of David" concerned Jews, and that "son of man and son of God" was what concerned Gentiles.

How far Jesus himself was from entertaining current Jewish ideas of Messiahship we may learn from his discourse to his disciples on the Mount of Olives concerning the impending destruction of Jerusalem. That discourse teaches two things of present concern to us. One is that, while proclaiming a benignant Father, who in his grace and magnanimity treats, to a large extent, evil and good alike, Jesus fully believed in the reality of an inexorable retributive order. Jerusalem destined to destruction for the sins of her children—behold a signal instance of that order! The discourse further teaches us that in the view of Jesus the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Jewish state was to have for its principal cause a *false Messianic hope*. "Many shall come saying I am Christ." There were men who said that in effect by stirring up the people to revolt against Rome, in the name of the Messianic idea, and, Josephus being witness, this was the cause of the national overthrow. With such hopes and aims Jesus had absolutely no sympathy. "Believe them not," said he to his disciples. Not national independence, but something far deeper and more precious, was what he offered to his countrymen. If they had listened to him, they would have been saved, not merely from political annihilation, but from greater evils. They might have remained subject to the yoke of Rome, but they would have been freed from the yoke of rabbinism, of legalism, of legal ideas of God, and of a religion of fear and of routine. Under the guidance of their true Messiah they would have passed into the liberty and joy of sonship, and become worshipers in spirit and in truth of their divine Father, the one Father of all.

It may seem as if in the mind here given Messiahship were sublimated into nothing, and that Jesus in our view can have used the term "Christ" only prudentially, as Dr. Baur, indeed, maintained he did use it. Not so. What is a Christ? The bringer in of the *summum bonum*, the fulfiller of the highest human hopes. That is the essence of the matter. In common with all Jews Jesus earnestly believed that such a Christ would come. Where he differed from all, John the Baptist not excepted, was in his conception of the *summum bonum*, and consequently of Messiah's spirit and function, as embodied in his doctrine of the kingdom of God.²

²I have read the critical remarks of "C. W. V." in the September number of the BIBLICAL WORLD on my article "The Easy Yoke" in the *Expositor* for August. Readers of the present article, written as it now appears before the BIBLICAL WORLD for September reached me, will see how entirely I agree with the view that Christ's ideas "were substantially those of the greatest Old Testament prophets." My assertion of the novelty of Christ's ideas in the paper commented on had, of course, reference, mainly, to the legalism of later Judaism, and it seemed to me worth while in that connection to make it strongly. But I must add that the assertion has its truth and importance even with reference to the prophets and psalmists. They were only a dawn. And it was an abortive dawn, if I may so express myself. The prophetic utterances were not epoch-making. Jeremiah's oracle of the new covenant remained dormant and forgotten for seven centuries. Only when revived by Jesus did the evangelical words of the Old Testament become at last a mighty power. As spoken by him they created a new religion, a new era, a new world.